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The Kula of the Gospels: Christianity, Magic, and Exchange in the Trobriand Islands

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Introduction: Contextualizing Christianity in the Trobriand Islands

Engaged in regular trade with Europeans from the nineteenth century, the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea have an ongoing tradition of intercultural encounters (Connelly 2016, 2018).[1] Whalers, explorers, traders, colonial officers, tourists, and missionaries have been weaving relational networks with Trobrianders for well over a hundred years. Early accounts are witness to the Trobrianders' predisposition to exchange things with dimdims, as foreigners are known in Kiriwina, the main Trobriand Island.[2] These exchanges, though, are not to be seen as simple transactions in artifacts and commodities. They also involved concepts and schemas attached to the things exchanged, transforming along the way those very objects that circulated together with people.

Cultural encounters entail not only physical and conceptual mobility but also reciprocal efforts of translation and adaptation to prepare a common ground of interaction where difference and similarity can meet. The Trobrianders' capacity to adopt and adapt foreign sociocultural elements encompasses material forms and more abstract ideas, ranging from local objects that imitate foreign ones (Jarillo 2017) to native versions of Western socioeconomic structures and practices (Kasaipwalova 1975; Leach 1978, 1982). These appropriations are best epitomized by the appropriation of cricket, the British colonial game par excellence. Brought in by Methodist missionaries, cricket was soon turned into an affirmation of

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Trobriand creative agency—if not outright ingenious resistance (Leach and Kildea 1976; Weiner 1978).

This tendency to adapt and adopt new ideas and things is not the product of colonial acculturation; instead, it is grounded in Trobriand relationality and the need to negotiate common values arising from encounters. In fact, establishing relations through trading is not a Trobriand exclusive; it was also a perceived requirement among the earliest foreign visitors to the Trobriand Islands. For example, in his study of whaling logs in island New Guinea, Alastair Gray noted: "When whalers wanted to trade, they were a great deal more circumspect in their choice of location because close relations with the islanders were required" (1999, 29). Trobriand sociality is in fact largely based on exchange, to the extent that the foreign is incorporated into local frameworks to facilitate that exchange, a type of assimilation also common in other parts of Melanesia (LiPuma 2000, 6).

As with cricket, local practices of Christianity can also be seen through this exchange lens. Like the majority of their fellow Papua New Guineans, Trobrianders present themselves as practicing Christians, and even though their interpretation of Christianity is intertwined with Trobriand cultural values, it can hardly be seen as an act of resistance as much as it is a negotiation of modernity and an act of ecumenical integration (Douglas 2002; Eves 2011). Although partly characterized by different interpretations at the denominational, parochial, and even individual level (Eriksen and MacCarthy 2019), Trobrianders imagine themselves as part of a global Christian community. This community—how Trobrianders conceive it—characterizes local interpretations, in the sense that it provides a contextual background for them. At the same time, these local interpretations may help shape the global framework in which they are embedded—as when anthropological theories of gift economies, exchange, and value are influenced by and understood through Trobriand examples (MacCarthy 2016, 2017a; Mauss 1990). But the latter is also part of an aspect of globalization that is still often ignored among Melanesianists concerned with what flows *from* the West *into* Melanesia (but see Barker 2019; McDougall 2020)—namely, the "reflexive process" that accompanies globalization, "reflexive in the sense that it entails intensified self-monitoring, a critical appreciation of the new possibilities that radical deterritorialization yields for revising personal and collective identities" (Foster 1999, 148).

This article analyzes some of these new possibilities in the shape of contemporary religious views in the Trobriand Islands. It looks at the processes by which Trobrianders integrate their custom into Christian worldviews.

Despite the immense corpus of Trobriand studies, little has been said about the particularities of Christianity in the islands, and it is only recently that anthropologists have begun to look at some of the instances associated with local religious practices (Eriksen and MacCarthy 2019; Jarillo and others 2020; MacCarthy 2017b, 2021; Mosko 2015). Using data obtained from intensive fieldwork in the Trobriands in a period spanning 2008 to 2018, this article examines the blending of local interpretations of Christianity with preexisting cosmological models and values and considers how this blending shapes contemporary Christian practices in the Milne Bay Province, where the Trobriand Islands are situated. Despite more than a hundred years of Christian missionization, religion in the Trobriand Islands is interpreted and enacted in close dialogue with local beliefs (Barker 1992; Trompft 1987) (figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Detail of painting adorning the main entrance of the Catholic church in Wapipi, Kiriwina Island, Trobriand Islands. A woman and a man in traditional attire can be seen holding, respectively, a soulava (Kula shell) necklace and a beku (stone head), both customary Trobriand valuables whose main purpose is to be exchanged. Photo by Sergio Jarillo, 2016.

In fact, some of these local, contemporary views of traditional conceptions are articulated through a syncretic view of religion that recasts them as being Christian in retrospect. This is the case of Trobriand magic, the heretofore mysterious source of garden productivity attributed to the performance of the first ancestors. Even after over a century of missionization, this narrative is left undisturbed, with the addition of another link to the ancestral origin of magic: God—with the ancestors not knowing at the time the godly source of their magic. Thus, both vernacular cosmologies and translocal Christianity (in its many denominations) seem to intersect and inform each other, making it difficult at times to trace a clear-cut divide between cultural resilience and innovation. In fact, from a Trobriand point of view, resilience and innovation appear as one.

The following two sections of this article map the arrival of Christianity to the region and how Trobrianders incorporated it within existing ideas, using tropes such as the transition from darkness to light. Trobriand conceptions of temporality and their role in facilitating this incorporation are analyzed next. This in turn provides the context to examine how Trobriand magic and ritual exchange become templates for the inclusion and expansion of Christian tropes. The last section uses the "exchange of sermons" to illustrate how Trobrianders "own" social change and tap into the possibilities that new frames of reference offer to reconfigure local identities.

Early Christianity and Trobriand Cosmologies

Christianity gained a foothold in the Massim at an early stage when Catholic missionaries settled briefly in Muyuw (Woodlark Island) in 1847 (Affleck 1983).[3] With the official annexation of New Guinea to the British Empire in 1888, it was not long before the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society started operating in the islands of present-day Milne Bay Province. In 1891, through the efforts of the Reverend George Brown, a seasoned Methodist missionary with prior experience in Fiji and New Britain, the Wesleyan Mission established itself in the Massim (MacGregor 1897, 91), first at Dobu with William Bromilow and in 1894 in Kiriwina with the Reverend Samuel Fellows (Bromilow 1929). In 1937 the Sacred Heart Catholic Mission opened in Gusaweta on the southwest coast of Kiriwina (Darrah nd; Mackay 1999). More recent times have seen the spreading through the islands of Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations, among which are the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Rhema

Bible Church, and the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (Eriksen and MacCarthy 2019).

Just like colonial officers, traders, and other visitors, missionaries have always been met by locals with curiosity. Early records from whalers' logs show how Trobrianders welcomed outsiders as potential trade partners and were quick to incorporate them and the things they brought into their exchange networks (Connelly 2014; Gray 1999).[4] The missionaries were also interested in incorporation, although of a different kind, as they were intent on the evangelization of locals. Missionaries attempted to privilege a message of unity, seeking universal commonalities that would draw native cosmologies closer to Christian theology. One of the most common ways to do this was through the identification of a God-like figure in the local pantheon.

In the Massim, several foundation myths point to a cultural hero who acts as a primordial creator, generating islands, shaping landmarks, gifting crops and foodstuffs, and establishing customs and exchange networks (Battaglia 1990; Jarillo and Barnett 2022; Lepowsky 1983, 489; Malnic 1998, 166–180). Father Xavier Montrouzier, one of the French Marist brothers who settled the Catholic mission in Woodlark Island in 1847, tried to connect this Massim demiurge (known as Gheren or Gereu in the northeast part of the Massim and Tudava or Dovana in the northwest) to the Christian concept of the Trinity (Gnecchi-Ruscone 2012, 399). This parallel appeared improbable to other Catholic missionaries at the time (Affleck 1983, 57–58), but the cross-cultural comparison ended up taking root in the region, and Massim foundation myths were ultimately integrated within Christian dogmas (Jarillo 2021a) (figure 2).

Today, Trobrianders often use similar analogies when trying to explain things to Western visitors. Trobrianders assume that a vernacular concept—such as the Trobriand afterlife in Tuma Island (Malinowski 1916)—is best understood if it can be explained in analogical ways. This is not only due to an exegetical effort to inform outsiders; it also helps Trobrianders visualize those aspects of Christian religion that appear too abstract to be apprehended without a familiar contextual background. Thus, the dead in the Trobriands have a "soul" that leaves the body after death to travel to Tuma and live there forever. Trobriand theologist Ignatius Ketobwau has compared Tuma to the Christian heaven (1994), although recent fieldwork in the Trobriands evidences more of an association between the two than an exact correspondence (Jarillo and others 2020). Yet when trying to explain and understand complex theological concepts, a few

FIGURE 2 Carved canoe prow board (tabuya) and splashboard (lagim) with a crucifix, by Paul Giyumkumumkwu Kalubaku of Oluweta Village, Kiriwina Island, on display at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA, Acc. No. 2018.10.1-2), University of Cambridge. Photo by Sergio Jarillo, 2009.

Trobrianders find it useful to draw parallels between Christian orthodoxy and Trobriand worldviews. Thus, Topileta, the guardian of the Tuma underworld, has a role similar to the one attributed to Saint Peter or Saint Michael in granting or denying access to paradise to the souls of the deceased.

But this pairing of Trobriand and Christian cosmologies goes beyond anthropological interpretations. It serves the purpose of presenting Christianity and its vernacular rendition as structures of conjuncture (Sahlins 1981, 1985), casting a holistic view of religion in the Massim. In that sense, and following Roy Wagner's model of symbolic interpretations as perception, Christian schemas and Trobriand magic can be seen

as mutually endorsing each other as a "dialogue-like alternation between two conceptions or viewpoints that are simultaneously contradictory and supportive of each other" (1981, 52). This mutual validation can be conceived from a Trobriand perspective as a novelty with roots in the past, a future that already existed as an earlier possibility. In fact, more than a radical novelty, Christianity is an expression of cyclical regeneration and space-time transformation through "spiral thinking," a recurrent concept in Massim culture (Darrah 1972; Jarillo 2021a; Munn 1986; Scoditti 2012; Weiner 1982). Epitomized by a visual metaphor known to Trobriand carvers as "gum," the spiral evokes several possibilities that can progress through what Trobriand Islander John Kasaipwalova called "nonlinear thought" (Malnic 1998, 142).

From Darkness to Light

When Trobrianders talk about Christianity, there is always an idea of moral progression associated with it, although this association is not prompted by a sense of inferiority as some Melanesian scholars claim when examining Christian conversion in Papua New Guinea (Robbins and Wardlow 2005). Christian religion is consistently linked to other positively connoted tropes that fall under a generic idea of modernity. Trobrianders tend to evaluate "new" things as generally positive, especially in contraposition to the "old stuff." The "new" is associated with "light" ("lumalama" in Kilivila, the language of the Trobriands). Today, "lumalama" stands for anything "bright that can pierce the darkness" (Lawton 2002). This is partly due to Father Ralph Lawton, a Methodist missionary who lived in the Trobriands for over fifty years working on a Kilivila translation of the Bible. Lawton glossed "lumalama," originally the light cast by the moon and later any light given off by a lamp, as the Christian way of the church or a revelation of the gospels (2002). Because of this, "light" is now used as a metaphor for knowledge and metonymically for anything that is new, especially in contraposition to "the old." Old stuff is "dark" ("dudubila," or "darkness"). A common expression in Kilivila to refer to pre-Christian times is that the people then "lived in darkness" (esisusa odudubila) because they "didn't know" (gala inukwalisi). The thinking, thus, is that modernity and Christianity are positive for bringing the necessary conditions for people "to see through the dark."

A Christian paradigm of progression from obscurity toward higher moral grounds was propagated in the Massim via missionization (Berde 1974),

but this was only possible because the light–darkness paradigm already existed there. There are a number of metaphors in the region that connote darkness as negative and light as positive. Anthropologist Frederick Damon described how in Muyuw, the "old year" is seen as "a time of darkness," as opposed to the "new year, a time of 'light,'" with the old considered bad and the new good (1982, 232). However, in what could be yet another interesting example of spiral temporality, of a future that already existed in the past (and vice versa), Damon reported elsewhere that the connection between past/dark and new/light also could have been "drawn from the church" (1990, 67). This reinforces the view that Christianity may not have been a radical imposition of external ideas but rather an example of mimetic incorporation, an exchange of behaviors, images, and symbols that "facilitate[s] intercultural communication" (Jarillo 2017).

In fact, the trope of light versus darkness and its use by missionaries is found throughout the Massim (Young 1980, 89). In the Trobriand Islands, master carvers carry out the initiation of apprentices at dawn, during the transition from night to day, "because light begins to dominate dark" (Scoditti 1990b, 173). Similarly, Nancy Munn told us of Gawa Island, where "skillful carvers are said to have been bespelled in childhood to purify their minds so that designs can . . . 'emerge outside' clearly delineated . . . in the light" (1977, 47; see also Munn 1986, 17). In her analysis of Gawan canoe-making and Kula exchange, Munn mentioned how the transformation of "negative qualisigns" (a type of dual image that stands for the whole it signifies, much like a symbol) into positive ones takes place through this transition from darkness to light (1986, 100). Darkness is unproductive and associated with, among other negative things, heaviness (of the body but also the canoe), death, and so-called "flying witches" (male and female spellcasters who prey on humans and whose bodies darken as they practice sorcery).[5] Conversely, light and lightness are seen as sought-after assets. For example, the Kilivila word "mwasila" denotes radiance, brilliance, beauty, and the capacity to attract others and bend their minds (the magic of attraction in the Trobriands is known as "kai-mwasila"). This radiance is achieved by shedding the darker aspects of personhood so as to attain an "unusual beauty" that makes the person "shin[e] like lightning," with brilliance being the precondition for success or, as some Massim anthropologists have labeled it, fame (Munn 1986, 99–101, 174). In keeping with the light metaphor, the image of lightning is most appropriate: fame is in fact the "thunderous roaring" ("butu," or "to roar") of one's name as it resounds throughout the Massim island world through the

person's accomplishments, well beyond the corporeal space and time of the living body.

Therefore, going from darkness and ignorance to light and understanding is a desired transition, a type of progression that Trobrianders try to reproduce in their daily actions. Before solar-powered flashlights became conspicuous around 2015, Trobrianders were embarrassed if they had no kerosene to light their lamps at night, and many would say, "We are in the dark, like in the old times."

This ordering of events, from a dark past to a bright present, bespeaks a somewhat evolutionary idea of history, but even though Trobrianders acknowledge the existence of a past, and of an even remoter time in which people lived inside the ground and of which little to nothing is known, events cannot always be placed along a linear continuum. In Trobriand cosmology, time is conceived as a "familiar" spiral in which unknown events in the future are made known by signaling them as already present in the past—a seemingly convoluted worldview that I hope to explain in the next section.

Trobriand Time and the Spirals of the Nautilus

Christianity's contribution to a Trobriand idea of history is sometimes at odds with the Massim conceptualization of time as near-circular recursion, but Trobrianders have successfully manipulated Christian linearity to fit events from the past into future projections. By virtue of this, the passage from darkness to light was brought by the missionaries, who carried God's knowledge into the Massim to defeat darkness. Yet this could not have happened had that possibility not existed in Trobriand cosmology. Conversations with locals show how this is defined by a vision of the past as the recurrent, malleable embryo of future possibilities.

In this nonlinear narrative, even past events admit variations. The past ("tuta omitibogwa" or "tokunibogwa," the "time already finished") is a constant recurrence. Former events and people keep "coming back" through acts of remembrance that summon ancestors, such as with the performance of megwa (magic), in which the initial part of the spell (bilubaloma) calls by name full genealogies of dead relatives to come and help with gardening, changing the weather, or healing (Darrah 1972; Jarillo and others 2020). The summoning itself is a repetition of what those dead ancestors themselves did when alive, making the present a reenactment of the past. Because of this, the past becomes "unfinished" time, as outcomes in the present are open and ongoing (Munn 1990). This means

the past must also be open ended enough to fit future changes, therefore carrying with it the seeds of innovation. In a way, it is continuity that allows for social change. Social replication, therefore, is included in variation, and variation gets included in social replication.

These ideas of temporality have a visual cue in the gum, an emblem carved in Kula canoes and fashioned after the chambered nautilus shell (*Nautilus pompilius;* see Jarillo 2021a). The nautilus grows into a logarithmic spiral, replicating its own smaller chambers into ever-growing ones by following the principle of the golden section (Scoditti 1990a). As Giancarlo Scoditti argued for Kitava Island, east of Kiriwina, the nautilus encompasses "the magnitude of the previous loop/performance" into the body of the shell, visually showing that what comes next is an expanded reproduction of the past. Expanding on the metaphor, Scoditti explained that "one version/performance is not denied by the next version/performance, which . . . can manipulate a new event by inserting it in the plot of the narrative—so that the previous version/performance is adapted to the historical contingency." Thus, "all the elements that are present in the current phase of an event were already identifiable, albeit in a smaller and different dimension, in a previous phase of the same event." (Scoditti 2012, 88).

The latent possibilities encompassed within the spiral symbol also inform Trobriand conceptions of Christian knowledge. The new religion is subsumed into the past, a possibility that was already there in the time of the ancestors, ready to take roots at the right time.

Magic and Christianity

In keeping with the spiral model, Christianity in the Trobriand Islands is constructed as a preexisting possibility, an unknown precursor of traditional magic, known in Kilivila as "megwa." Megwa is a complex system of knowledge that is seen by locals as instrumental in helping them achieve their social and personal goals (Darrah 1972; Malinowski 1922; 1935, vol 1). Megwa spells are used almost daily in the Trobriand Islands for gardening, making rain, bringing wind, cutting new canoes, carving objects, seducing potential partners, singing, dancing, and causing or relieving sickness, among many other things. It includes vocalized spells in which the agent invokes the help of several entities (mostly ancestors but also supernatural beings like tokwai [spirits]) to reach a determined result. The complexity of megwa goes beyond the recited magic formulas, as it also involves the observance of food taboos and other personal restrictions

(kikila), the preparation of plant-based concoctions (bulami), and several other inherited techniques, procedures, and actions (collectively known as "simuli") that determine the efficacy of the spell.

Although it is not within the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of megwa spells, it is important to note that Trobrianders tend to agree in their belief that the efficacy of megwa is partly reliant on the beings summoned during the invocation. In all the megwamwaya spells (the "old, important megwa," as opposed to "small spells" known as "megwalela"),[6] the first part of the spell calls on the performer's ancestors. This is called the "bilubaloma" or "bilibaloma" part of the spell. In it, the performer recites the names of her or his matrilineal ancestors, starting with the ancestor from which the spell originated and proceeding toward the present until the most recently deceased person is named; it is from this last person that the performer has likely obtained the spell. This recitation serves the purpose of tracing a genealogy of the spell, a most important task since spells are said to belong to a given dala (matrilineage) (they are indeed called the "tukwa" of the dala, the spells that belong to that matrilineage) and are usually inherited within the matrilineage, although there are many exceptions to this, most notably when megwa is purchased outside the matriline using traditional veiguwa (valuables).

Calling on the bilubaloma spirits of deceased ancestors serves the double purpose of memorialization and efficacy, as the spell assists remembrance while asking for the intercession of the ancestors' spirits. As people in the islands explained to me, some megwa formulas make this very explicit: right after listing all their names, the performer asks her or his ancestors to "sit behind me to give me guidance, steer my magic and help me achieve my goals" (Jarillo and others 2020; Mosko 2014). The role of ancestors is crucial, and observing the kikila and following the simuli are as important as the bilubaloma summoning. For example, simuli encompass past actions that guide present performance to ensure the cooperation of the ancestors and thus a successful future. Because of this, megwa can be rightly considered as a system reliant on the temporal collapse of past and future: knowledge, support, strength, and success come from the ancestors, and following their ways grants a future that is very much in tune with the past. Visually or metaphorically, this is yet another iteration of the ever-growing and self-replicating spiral.

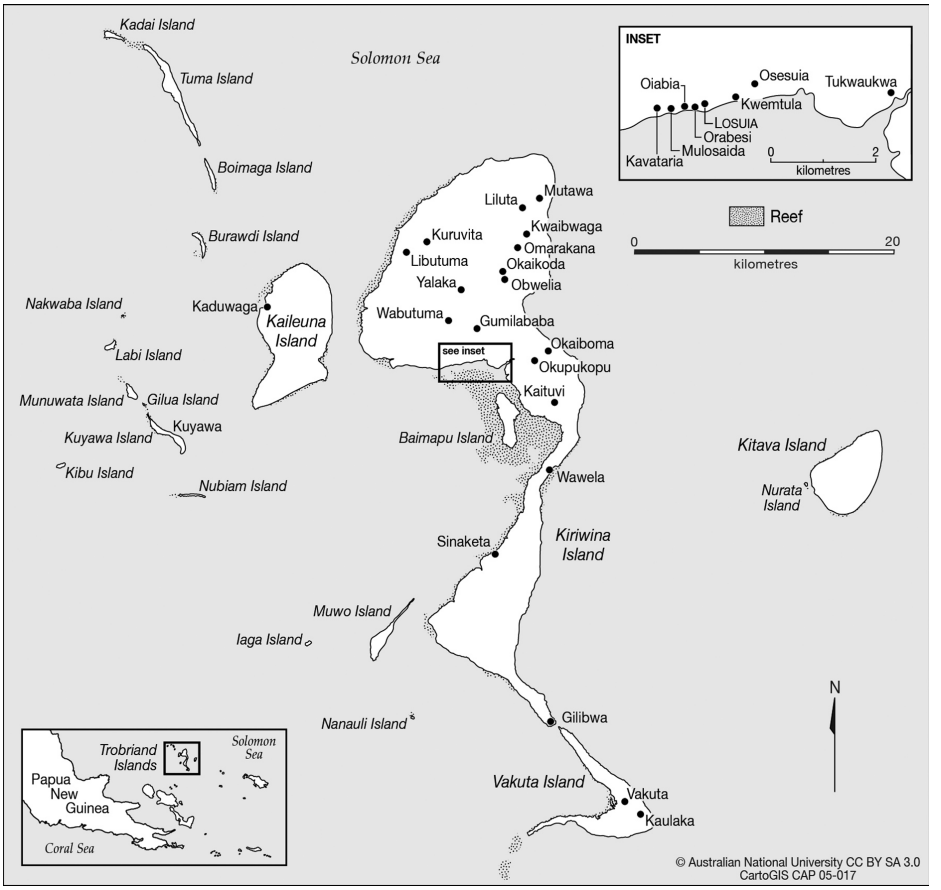
Even devout Christians in the Trobriand Islands do not see megwa spells as incompatible with prayer. Instead, they see these as two separate yet compatible systems to reach a goal. The degree of integration between

megwa and Christianity varies according to the person, although nobody in the islands ever completely ruled out the efficacy of megwa in my presence. As varied as they can be, the contextualizing efforts to integrate megwa and Christian prayer seem to hinge on one fact: megwa always works because the first ancestor, the one who passed on all the (good) magic, is God. In present-day Papua New Guinea, Christian Trobrianders conceive God as the first ancestor common to all clans. Although he was unknown to locals during the "dark times," his agency remains undiscussed: it already existed in the past in latent form. Like the visual metaphor of the nautilus shell, God is seen as a generative force with a retroactive potential that opens into the future, replicating its components only to outgrow them with every addition. This is not unlike Wagner's proposed model of cultural innovation: "building metaphor upon metaphor in such a way as to continually divert the force of earlier expressions and subsume it into newer constructions" (1981, xiv). The Trobriand present draws from the past, yet it does not replicate it line for line, allowing instead several variations.

Towosi: A Christian Pastor Sings His Magic

Early Christian iconography from Roman catacomb frescoes adopted pagan images and adapted them to biblical themes, sanctioning a representation of God as the Good Shepherd that has ongoing currency around the world, more so in rural areas (Lamberton 1911, 511; Porter 2001). The Trobriand Islands are no exception, and the image of pastoral authority and guidance is equally adopted and adapted to the local context, with an emphasis in gardening, the quintessential Trobriand activity. In early 2013 I met Gilbert, a Methodist pastor from the United Church in Papua New Guinea (the oldest and still majority Christian denomination in Milne Bay Province) in the village of Obweria (spelled "Obwelia" in map 1) in central Kiriwina. I had been told that Gilbert was a modern-day towosi, the garden magician who at the time of Bronislaw Malinowski used to bespell all the Trobriand yam gardens (kaimata) to guarantee bountiful crops (Malinowski 1935, vol 2). Nowadays the figure of the towosi (literally "singing man") is no longer claimed by anybody in the islands, and Trobriand gardeners singularly apply whatever megwa they know to their own gardens. Gilbert's practice constitutes an exception to this.

"It's all about contextualization," Gilbert said, the last word in English: "You cannot bring old and new together unless you do some contextualization. I overlap Kilivila tradition and Christianity. I adapt Kilivila



Map 1 Trobriand Islands. CartoGIS CAP 05–017. © CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, CC BY SA 3.0.

custom into the teachings of the Bible. Spirit worshippers have spells and invite the spiritual beings [tokwai] to help; then you have to observe some taboos for the magic to work. Traditionally the towosi was in charge of this service, with the mokema helpers implementing what the towosi instructs. I contextualize all of this into Christianity without losing a single idea. The mokema also have to observe the bomaboma [taboos]. Otherwise the system won't work."[7]

In the past, Trobrianders used to categorize yam gardeners according to their proficiency, as measured by their knowledge—including symbolic, magical, calendrical, botanical, and practical. According to long-term Trobriand resident Leo Austen, in this categorization, the towosi were on top, followed by, in descending order, the mokema ("those . . . learned

in garden cultivation as well as having a certain amount of knowledge concerning garden magic, and also the garden periods [kweluva]"); the kumatola (those having "only a small knowledge of garden magic"); the tolei (those "who are not acquainted with garden magic but who have a certain amount of proficiency in gardening"); and, lastly, the malagawa (those "who usually have small garden plots, often well kept, but whose skill in gardening is very limited"). As Austen recounted, "Most people start as *malagawa*, rising to the other grades as they buy their learning from those competent to pass on the knowledge" (1945, 36). Although this hierarchy is no longer in place for gardening, Gilbert used it to draw a parallel with the church hierarchy of the United Church.

In Gilbert's view, the pastor is the towosi, God is the supreme spirit, and the ministerial heads are the mokema. The Ecclesia congregation are the gardeners (kumatola, tolei, and malagawa, although no one in the Trobriands would use these terms nowadays). Gilbert went on: "For example, before cutting the new gardens I tell the people to bring their *nepa* [bush knives] and I pray over them. Then I tell people not to swear, not to lie. Then there is the burning of the gardens after the clearing: commit these things under the holy act of God. We must conduct this in a meaningful way. We pray over the *kaitapola* [the charmed coconut fronds used to set the newly cut gardens on fire before planting the yam seeds]. Then we fast." In Gilbert's description, there are a number of techniques and procedures to be followed, as well as taboos, not unlike those prescribed for the practice of megwa. Gilbert explained that sometimes after the burning, there is a rain: "It's a shower of blessing. It means our prayers have been heard, the magic has worked. Some other times after you burn the garden, a hurricane-like fire appears in the garden; that's a sign of the power of God." Similar signs, known as *kariyala*, also appear as a "by-product of magic" (Malinowski 1935, 1:146). Gilbert said he gives people passages of the Bible to use as spells "because God too is a gardener, as the Bible says." According to Gilbert, the system of garden magic, including those who implement it, remains as it used to be, with the exception that now God is brought in. In fact, God has always been involved, Gilbert clarified, but people were unaware of him being the ultimate source of the magic system. Bringing this to the fore is what Gilbert referred to as contextualization. The form of the system stays the same, but the content is enhanced by making explicit the connection to God.

"I found inspiration for contextualization in the Bible," Gilbert continued, "for instance, in John, chapter 6: Jesus feeding the crowd of five

thousand. In Kiriwina we blame the land for the current scarcity: Where did the fertility go? In the past there was abundance, they used magic spells, and there was prosperity ["kalaguyau meriapwasa," the chief's abundance]. But people have forgotten those spells, and that's why there's scarcity, that's why I bring God into the existing system, because the content [of the magic] is gone and God is better. These long yams [he pointed to kuvi long yams in his bwema resting house] demonstrate it."

Gilbert's example shows Christianity's influence on local events, not so much as a force of change but as one of regeneration. The paradox is that missionization has reinforced Trobriand tradition. Trobrianders have taken in biblical historicity by transforming foreign elements into their own and by retaining vernacular elements in the resulting construct (figure 3).

In doing so, past events are resignified and made conventional. Thus, going from darkness to light is achieved through the intercession of the missionaries who brought God's knowledge, but this is so because the possibility already existed in the Trobriand universe, as Gilbert stated. His "contextualization" is in fact a full recognition of social change that casts change as already existing. Given the fact that at the time he was trying to assert his position and establish his reputation as a man of religion within the Trobriand tradition, Gilbert was particularly interested in making the association between megwa and Christianity work. His exegesis would serve the purpose of endorsing him as a privileged interpreter of Trobriand custom and Christian faith, a modern-day towosi whose knowledge translates into fame. But if the latter is to retain its currency, holding on to existing social and cultural values makes more sense than creating new ones: fame travels better along existing paths.

Katupela Guguya, the Exchange of Sermons

Gilbert's example is an instance of how a new model incorporated using known patterns has proved to be widely accepted, validating the former as part of a vernacular tradition. In Gilbert's case, this was done through the use of megwa: reciting a magic spell involves reenacting the past, bringing the ancestors back to the present, and returning to a past state of plenty. This way of integrating continuity with tradition entails the reification of personal relations within the dala matrilineage, but there are other instances that do not require such personal direct links.

FIGURE 3 Detail of painting depicting Virgin Mary at the altar of the Catholic church in Wapipi, Kiriwina Island. The Virgin wears a traditional doba fiber skirt, a kuwa necklace, and a sedabala chiefly headband and is holding a soulava. Photo by Sergio Jarillo, 2016.

I now want to introduce an example that does not involve the use of magic but that, nonetheless, is also modeled on preexisting cultural institutions—more precisely the Kula exchange popularized by Malinowski (1922), which has since been the subject of anthropological scrutiny.

Despite the Kula having been the subject of endless studies by scholars, it is assumed (mostly by anthropologists) that Trobrianders themselves are content with practicing it without questioning any of its tenets, following whatever rules "the Kula" has. Yet Trobrianders willingly combine nominal knowledge and empirical practice to invest the Kula (or Kula-like exchanges) with new signification, proving that it is not the unchanging, normative institution that some researchers, eager to define it unequivocally once and for all, try to pin down by enumerating its rules (Leach and Leach 1983).

A more appropriate way to try to understand the Kula would be one that looks not at what it is but at what it does and how it does it. As Damon suggested, the Kula serves as a template to establish a path ("keda" in Kilivila, "ked" in Muyuw) or a way (as in a way of life). This way of life is predicated on a system of relations that establishes what can and cannot be done (Damon 2021). Yet these possibilities are precisely so: they are not always preestablished, and one is encouraged to seek new routes and paths. Knowledge of those means new possibilities, change that nonetheless remains *within* the relations. Knowledge of Christianity inscribes relations with new meanings—and possibilities.

Not long ago, the United Church was openly against the Kula (Leach 1983, 14). Oddly enough—or precisely because of their objection to it—the missionaries set in motion a practice of exchange formally inspired by some of the elements that make up the Kula trade. The practice in question is known as "katupela guguya" (exchange of sermons). The expression is formed of "katupela," meaning not only "to come back" (Hutchins and Hutchins 2016), "to go forward," or "to change from one house to another" but also "to continue telling a story by telling another one" (Lawton 2002). "Guguya" is a loanword from Dobu (the area southwest of the Trobriand Islands, also within the Kula exchange) meaning "to exhort peace." In Kilivila, the meaning of "guguya" is closer to "preaching," as it has been glossed as "educating by giving a sermon or a public speech as it is usually done by chiefs" (Lawton 2002). Katupela guguya is said to have been initiated by an ordained Trobriand Minister at Oyabia Village in Kiriwina, Lepani Gumagawa, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. With katupela guguya, whole villages in the Trobriand, Kitava, and Iwa Islands are encouraged to visit close or distant communities to "give prayers" on a set date. The territory is divided into several circuits, each of which is overseen by a superintendent minister. Each circuit contains two sections headed by two section ministers and within which are several villages.[8]

For two consecutive days, the Word of God is gifted to partner villages by visiting parties as they guguya for their hosts. Later, the hosts must do the same, offering other passages of the Bible to their current guests. Most importantly, a visiting party does not host the section it visited immediately afterward: "gala bitamapu" (we do not reciprocate), Trobrianders say, stressing the fact that the giving of sermons is disinterested and there cannot be immediate reciprocity. In fact, some missionaries in the Trobriand Islands recall how at the very beginning of katupela guguya there used to be immediate reciprocity. This set up a series of competitive displays in which the hosts kept raising the bar in terms of how lavishly they treated their guests, until it was decided that a visiting section could not immediately host the visited section the following year but instead had to wait a number of years. Each visit is called a "lola" ("a walk" or "to walk") and each section is involved in two lola walks, first hosting (lola 1) and then traveling (lola 2) or vice versa. The superintendent minister advises the section ministers inside each circuit what to preach about. The theme is just a main idea that the pastor of each congregation then develops by doing research and creating subthemes. Because pastors know their congregations, they are generally the ones who decide who the preacher (toguguya) will be, although individuals can also take the initiative and request to give a sermon. The pastor appoints a chairperson within each group of toguguya who will act as the coordinator of the group.

Katupela guguya usually takes place around Easter, a timing for which a biblical justification is given. In fact, some laymen in the Trobriands quoted "The Great Commission" (Matt 28:19–20 [NIV]): "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Despite this, several Trobriand United Church ministers confirmed that the period from March to April is usually chosen because the winds are calmer at that time, making interisland travel safer. Visiting parties usually start traveling on Friday morning so as to reach their destination that same evening. The official welcoming takes place on Saturday afternoon with the first call to prayer ("yakaula," or praise). Guests and hosts attend the service together, at the end of which the guests start giving their sermons. On Sunday morning the guests go out to other villagers within the hosts' circuit and continue to give sermons in neighboring hamlets and villages. The midday service is then carried out by the visiting pastor,

and a final round of guguya takes place to finalize the religious program. After the ensuing feast (paka) is over, the hosts bid farewell to the preaching party and give them parting presents. These include betel nut; uncooked food (kaula genata); handicrafts (woven baskets, mats, carvings); clothes and housewares; and sometimes even pigs. Many people will also engage in proper Kula talks with their partners at the end of the katupela guguya, and it is fairly common to see visiting parties going back home with Kula valuables (figure 4).

FIGURE 4 David, a young man from Sinaketa Village in southern Kiriwina Island, returns home from a katupela guguya in Omarakana Village with the mwali Gudara, a prized Kula valuable he obtained during the exchange of sermons. Photo by Sergio Jarillo, 2010.

Words and Networks

Most United Church ministers and laymen stress the association between the Kula and the exchange of sermons. As one pastor explained it to me: "Tapwaroru esunapula wakula; tapwaroru emeyasi minaDobu wakula" (the church "came out" with the Kula; it was the people of Dobu who brought the church to Kiriwina when they came with the Kula). This alludes to the fact that the first Methodist missionaries in Milne Bay Province were indeed based in Dobu (Young 1980). It is likely that Dobuans, when traveling to the Trobriands on Kula expeditions to get soulava necklaces, may have mentioned the activities of the newly arrived dimdims in Dobu to their counterparts, contributing to the spreading of Christian ideas either directly or indirectly.

The United Church in Papua New Guinea has been characterized by its efforts to indigenize its hierarchy, especially after 1968, when it pushed to train more Melanesian ministers. Nowadays, Massim ministers are the ones who tend to highlight the identification between Kula and katupela guguya. To do so, they use metaphors and reify the Word of God by comparing the passages of the Bible to Kula valuables, precious "objects" that need to circulate to enrich the lives of those who give them and of those who take them or listen to them. The Word of God unveils paths that are similar to the keda paths of Kula valuables. Katupela guguya and the Kula are built on words. Words are essential to get Kula valuables, either directly, as in the Kula parlance used to "soften" the minds of Kula partners and coax them into giving away shells, or indirectly, as when megwa spells are uttered to guarantee positive outcomes in Kula expeditions. Likewise, the written Word of God shows the right path to becoming a good Christian. Thus, the right words can turn into Kula valuables and help people acquire renown. In a Christian context, the right words are yet another path to build a reputation and acquire fame.

As previously suggested through the example of the Christian towosi, social change happens through community endorsement of practices and institutions that remain familiar. In the exchange of sermons, biblical narratives are reified and "attached" to the guest community that brings them to their hosts. Individual preachers get recognition for their prowess, which is associated with a good knowledge of the scriptures and a capacity to interpret those within the themes and subthemes developed together with the pastors. The creativity displayed in the sermons is evidenced in discourses through the use of metaphors and images to which the community

can easily relate. Thus, garden tropes are common, not unlike those used by Pastor Gilbert. These tropes cast together biblical texts and Trobriand lore, which is evident to a Trobriand audience, but the tropes also contain embedded social norms and cultural values in less evident ways. Prominent among these are the exchange obligations and the need to balance those obligations evenly, as imposed by the Trobriand relational ethos. The interdependence of Kula trade partners is built on these obligations via a sense of belonging to the same community (ie, the Kula one) despite differences (eg, at the individual, village, or even island level). Similarly, religion imposes obligations that require people to uphold a common identity that is both Trobriand and Christian. The exchange of sermons establishes a model of ideal Christian personhood through the performance of a shared spirituality based on the familiar pattern of another well-known ceremonial exchange (figure 5).

"Good" Kula people get their fame by giving away shell valuables. Shells encompass relations, as well as the personhood aspects of those who perform those relations (Damon 2021; Munn 1986). A Kula shell is, so to speak, a person and a network. Reified Bible verses are treated similarly.

FIGURE 5 Detail of nativity scene inside the Catholic church in Wapipi, Kiriwina Island. Baby Jesus sits on a model Kula canoe (known as "mwasawa" or "tadobu" in Kilivila). Photo by Sergio Jarillo, 2016.

In the context of katupela guguya, words from the Bible draw together the person who speaks them and those who are gifted the words. But the words also help establish networks of reciprocity, as most exchanges in the Massim require. Katupela guguya is a good opportunity to build new partnerships with individuals and communities. It also offers a good chance to showcase one's knowledge and strengthen personal status beyond one's own community, therefore increasing the possibilities of expanding exchange networks.

Conclusion

There is much talk in Melanesian anthropology about the building of personal relations and how conceptions of personhood thus established intersect with conceptions of Christianity (Robbins 2004). Some proponents of the so-called New Melanesian Ethnography claim that the partible personhood intrinsic to Melanesia has played a significant role in helping Christianity establish itself in Papua New Guinea (see Josephides 1991). The partible elements within Christian religion would be easily identified by locals and create some degree of continuity, favoring the integration of foreign and native cosmologies (Mosko 2010). Continuity between native beliefs and systems and native understandings and adaptations of Christianity appears to be actively endorsed by Trobrianders. Steven Okaulayagila, an active member of the Catholic community of Yalumgwa Village, expressed the general perception among Catholic members throughout Kiriwina:

> The Catholic Church has never tried to destroy our culture but has always gone along with it. Just like Jesus respected the culture he was living in. Religious leaders have the same functions [as] Trobriand chiefs and are equally respected and listened to. Trobriand Catholic churches are decorated with traditional Trobriand motifs [figures 6 and 7], and our communities participate in traditional events (like sagali mortuary distributions) without any church interference. If anything, the church helps us with our traditional commitments. Nothing like Rhema or the Foursquare [two Pentecostal denominations present in Kiriwina; see MacCarthy 2017b], who are trying to ban sagali or Trobriand traditional dances. (pers comm, December 2016)

Steven's discourse reflects a common understanding in the Trobriand Islands toward Christian religion—namely, that it is not a disruptive force and that whatever novelty it brought, it was a novelty that already existed

FIGURE 6 A man puts the finishing touches on a canoe, partly carved out of banana trees, to be used as the setting for a nativity scene during a competitive Christmas display in Obweria Village, Kiriwina Island. Photo by Sergio Jarillo, 2016.

in Trobriand tradition. The readiness with which Trobrianders appropriate elements that are external to their culture and make them look as intrinsically theirs is all encompassing (Jarillo 2017). Daniel, a United Church pastor in Kitava Island, once told me he believed Trobrianders already knew the Bible even before the Europeans arrived; he argued that Trobrianders were one of the lost tribes of Israel.[9] According to Daniel, this is confirmed by the name of the cave from which many Trobriand dala matrilineages emerged, Labai. "Labai is a deformation of Levi," Daniel maintained. "People didn't come from a hole or a cave. The Levi clan came on canoes and swam ashore, emerging from the holes that connect the beach to the mainland through the coral cliffs. With time, the story and the name got distorted, and we were made to think our ancestors emerged from the ground, but they only swam and stayed in the cave" (Daniel, pers comm, May 2009).

Social change is hardly ever seen as an external element in the Trobriand Islands. Elements of novelty are made to be Trobriand by acknowledging them as having preexisted in different forms and configurations, as in the case of God, the previously unknown source of Trobriand magic. Similarly, Christian knowledge is reified and exchanged following the patterns of the

FIGURE 7 Rehearsing the positioning of carved figures on the canoe for the nativity display in Obweria Village, Kiriwina Island. Photo by Sergio Jarillo, 2016.

Kula. But not all social change is absorbed in the same way. As Steven said, the latest newcomers to the Trobriands, the Pentecostals, have made it a point to break from tradition in the name of more uniform, universal Christian practices (MacCarthy 2017b; Eriksen and MacCarthy 2019). This notwithstanding, change is ultimately socialized, so to speak, in the sense that it is actively driven forward by Trobriand society through conscious acts of appropriation (or refusal in the case of Pentecostal denominations) that often point to an existing Trobriand institution or practice. Paradoxically, the fact that said practice or institution (eg, magic or the Kula) is still widely recognized and carries currency into the twenty-first century may have to do, at least partly, with its capacity to accommodate variation through different performances and interpretations. In fact, the capacity of Trobriand culture to resist change lies precisely in its capacity to embody that change.

* * *

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Islanders mentioned here who helped me try to understand how things work. Any shortcomings are obviously my own, and I apologize for those in advance. Thank you to Pastor Gilbert; to Father Homero, Camillus Mlabwema Mkwesipu, Stephen Okaulayagila, Claire Bomlabwaga, Linus SilipolaKhapulapola digim'Rina; and to the people of Yalumgwa for your endless patience and love. I also want to thank Allan Darrah for his generosity and his insights, and the two anonymous reviewers who helped make this article better. (Mapana pwepu igau lakalawa wamitin Alotau makwa tetu 2015 e teivelisi elukwegusi avaka bobwena e avaka gala bwena, oluyeki lagini, Magigu bakatoki matosine ladou yagasi wapwepu. Kagutoki Pastor Gilbert, Father Homero, Mlabwema Mkwesipu, Okaulayagila, Bomlabwaga, Doketa Linus digim'Rina, e minYalumgwa komwedona kagutoki sena kweyveka pela tuta tuta mipilasi, ayobwerimi komwedona. Bakatoki tuvela Professor Allan Darrah pela sena tolalasi deri sena tokabitam. Kidamwa sula kena sopa wapwepu mayana gala matosine epilasegusi sisula mtaga yegu titolegu, soli wala.)

Notes

1 The Trobriand Islands are a 174-square-mile archipelago of coral atolls off the eastern coast of New Guinea, part of the Kiriwina-Goodenough District situated in Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea. They are officially known as the Kiriwina Islands after the largest island, Kiriwina. Islanders themselves refer to their home as Bweyowa, Boyowa, or Kilivila (the latter is also the name of the vernacular language), although they also use Trobriand as toponym and Trobriander as demonym to include the islands and Islanders of Kaileuna, Vakuta, Kuyawa, Munuwata, Tuma, and Simsimla, especially when talking to outsiders.

2 "Dimdim" is one of the terms used throughout the Milne Bay Province to refer to non-Melanesian foreigners. Debbora Battaglia, who did fieldwork in the southern Massim, pointed to a possible etymology, indicating that the first Europeans arrived in the area from the east, the place of the "mythical Dimdim reefs" (1990, 19).

3 The Massim is a cultural area, the mostly maritime region that coincides, roughly, with the islands that make up the easternmost part of Milne Bay Province in Papua New Guinea (see Young 1983). Just like "Kula Ring," the term seems more popular with anthropologists than with locals.

4 Of all the early visitors to the Trobriand Islands, whalers were probably the most likely to engage in more or less regular trade with locals. As opposed to merchant ships, whalers would have had to call on islands for food, water, and firewood supplies quite frequently in their constant search for whaling grounds. The perceived friendliness of the inhabitants of the Massim would have facilitated the establishment of exchange networks at the time (Connelly 2014; Gray 1999, 31, 40). I am not comparing these newly minted exchanges with outsiders to the more established customary exchange networks that already operated in the Trobriands prior to the arrival of Europeans, but it is true nonetheless that

Trobriand Islanders have always displayed a keen sense of engagement with potential trade partners, a disposition that my first research in the islands from 2008 onward can only confirm.

5 The anthropological literature usually translates "mulukwausi" as "flying witch," most likely because another Kilivila synonym, "nayoyowa," literally means "she who flies." Despite the fact that a majority of mulukwausi are women, Trobrianders accept that men too can be "flying witches," provided they know the right magic (Jarillo 2021b).

6 Trobrianders categorize megwa spells as follows: megwamwaya (the "big" or "old" magic) includes silami (evil spells); yuvisa (healing spells used to counter silami); urikuna (rain spells); kaeyausa (a personal concealment spell used by bwagau sorcerers); and uributu (a spell of personal attraction). Further inquiry makes this classification even more complex. Healing spells, for instance, can be split between proper yuvisa and kaetakoni, the latter being healing spells for minor ailments that are not considered megwamwaya and therefore are not included among the yuvisa. The rule of thumb seems to be that those spells that do not include the reciting of genealogies at the beginning (bilubaloma) are minor spells (megwalela).

7 Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from my fieldwork are my own translations of the original Kilivila conversations.

8 In 2013, the circuits were Kilivila circuit, from Moligilagi Village to Kaibola Village; Kaileuna circuit, encompassing the whole of Kaileuna Island plus Kuyawa, Munuwata, and Simsimla Islands; Fellows circuit (named after the Reverend Fellows), from Kavataria Village to Kwemtula Village; Luba circuit, from Oyuveyova Village to Kaituvi Village; Kuboma circuit, from Gumlababa Village to Yalaka and Lobua villages; Kula circuit, including Kitava and Iwa Islands; and Simla (island) circuit, from Kaituvi to Kaulaka Village in Vakuta Island. Woodlark and Gawa Islands used to participate in the katupela guguya with their own circuits, but they have not done so in a while now. The circuits remained unchanged in 2015 and 2018, although in the latter year, nominally Catholic villages in Kiriwina began joining the katupela guguya.

9 This is a constant in Melanesia: Alison Dundon documented it among the Gogodala people in the Western Province of Papua New Guinea (2011), and Jaap Timmer reported an equivalent instance in Malaita in Solomon Islands (2012).

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Abstract

Katupela guguya, or "exchange of sermons," is a current practice in the Trobriand Islands in which whole villages visit close or distant communities to give prayers on a set date. The Word of God is gifted by visiting parties who preach for their hosts; hosts will later reciprocate, offering other Bible passages when they visit their current guests' village. Modeled partly on the familiar patterns of circulation

of the Kula exchange, katupela guguya also entails more material exchanges, including, on some occasions, Kula valuables. The reification of Christian cultural elements not only facilitates their circulation in exchange circuits; it also helps define these circuits, investing them with new meanings. This increased mobility (of things and ideas) has been capitalized on by some individuals to posit a coherent continuity between traditional magic practices and present-day understandings of Christianity. The exchange of sermons offers original insights on how people conceptualize and negotiate social change in the Massim cultural region (Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea) to which the Trobriand Islands belong.

KEYWORDS: religion, identity, cosmology, syncretism, spiral time, gift exchange, social change